

Myra Bradwell: The Unstoppable Female Force

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Though the issue had long been recognized, it seemed as though no one would fight for justice, for, was it impossible for men and women to be equal? Unfortunately, it seemed so, which thrust several women into rebellion, wishing that somehow, they might earn respect. With time, the issue seemed to gain more attention, eventually catching the eye of a seemingly everyday schoolteacher. This woman's name was Myra Bradwell, an intelligent, powerful, and passionate believer in both her future and the future of women in Illinois. What seemed socially acceptable at the time was, in fact, a web of limitations placed upon the female gender. Avidly, Myra Bradwell fought to bring long-awaited justice to the situation, though what she gained also altered Illinois government immensely. In response to restrictive, gender-prejudicial laws in the 1800s, Myra Bradwell was determined to win rights for women; she persevered, thus paving a course to future opportunity for women in Illinois.

Eager to get involved in law, Myra Bradwell fulfilled a legal apprenticeship in her husband's office, assisting him with cases, during which time she gradually began to recognize her evident talent within the profession. Although Myra Bradwell had passed the Illinois Bar Exam with prodigious honors in 1869, she was arbitrarily denied her license to practice. Instantaneously, Mrs. Bradwell reacted, for she knew exactly why she had been rejected. In fact, there was no legitimate reason, naught but the fact that she was a woman. Appalled and enraged, Myra Bradwell filed suit against the state of Illinois, thus spawning the ever-controversial case "Bradwell vs. Illinois". Senator

Matthew H. Carpenter was hired to defend Myra Bradwell in court, and did so with extreme confidence and loyalty, thoroughly delighting Mrs. Bradwell. Issues addressed were those such as prejudice against female assets, as Illinois' initial fears were that women would use "persuasive" characteristics to sway cases in their favor. Though the senator proved excellent and quite valid points, the court remained displeased and rather uninterested in Myra Bradwell's case, which only thrust the pair to a merciless loss in 1873.

Myra Bradwell knew that it would be challenging to achieve what she chiefly desired—equality—but she was a resourceful woman, and she allowed no insignificant loss to impede her; hence, Myra Bradwell used one essential asset to her great advantage: writing. Myra Bradwell was granted permission to begin her own newspaper, *The Chicago Legal News*, in 1861. In order to run the newspaper, Myra Bradwell acquired a specified grant that allowed her to perform transactions under her own name, rather than her husband's, and thus she became a female publisher, manager, and editor of her own paper. Through the *Chicago Legal News*, Myra Bradwell could express her opinions freely and boldly, eventually using the paper as her unlimited voice, commenting on anything from general social injustice to the incompetence of judges and lawyers in Illinois courts. Despite the fact that Myra Bradwell was a woman, readers seemed thoroughly taken with the *Chicago Legal News*. However, the paper *did* face several complications, including the Great Chicago Fire, which devastated the paper's offices.

Despite her radical success, arrogance never seemed to phase nor cross Myra Bradwell, as she held her companions equal to her associates, and was therefore eager to help Mary Todd Lincoln in her time of desperation. In 1875, Mrs. Lincoln called to

Myra Bradwell for assistance for release from a sanitarium. Demonstrating her clever expertise, Myra Bradwell was able to ease and minimize the press, then displaying her legal knowledge to secure the release of her close friend, once more proving Myra Bradwell's evident competence.

In the 1890s, Myra Bradwell became, at long last, a licensed legal attorney, accepted to the Illinois Bar, and appeared before Supreme Court. Myra Bradwell served as vice president of the Illinois Bar Association, for four terms, during which time she participated in the creation of the Chicago Bar Association. Though, in addition, she was a passionate, willful women's activist, which earned her the status of secretary of the Illinois Women Suffrage Association. In her new position, she gave a speech at a Chicago convention in 1869 that helped form a greater image of women's opportunities in Illinois. She could not hesitate, though, and Myra Bradwell's fervent obsession with gender-equality was eagerly displayed as she fought for passages of Illinois laws, including an 1872 law that allowed women to enter any and all professions. Then, once more, Myra Bradwell's writing expertise interfered, and she was responsible for the specific change of "man" to "person" in an Illinois law of public notaries, balancing the equality of man and woman as she saw fit. Unable to conceal her naturally dynamic character, Myra Bradwell participated in the penning of Illinois bills, such as the Married Women's Property Act of 1861, and the Earnings Act of 1869.

It seemed as though nothing could tame Myra Bradwell and her pro-feminine equality mindset, and nothing men attempted could. Truthfully, she possessed everything a woman could hope for in a lifetime—remarkable success, a strong family, and her rightful place in history. The journey that may have begun as a quest for

women's opportunity in law had rapidly changed into the journey that took the female gender to bewildering heights. Though, initially, Myra Bradwell sought what was said to be the impossible, she ended up altering Illinois government and general discrimination in a way that people had always longed, but never fought gallantly enough for. It can safely be said that Myra Bradwell died an accomplished woman, an inspirational, influential woman of her time, and a magnificent woman in law—and nothing less than a great woman in Illinois History. [From Jane M. Friedman, *America's First Woman Lawyer*; Lyndee J. Henderson, *Remarkable Illinois Women*; John H. Keiser, *Building for the Centuries*; New York Times Company, "Myra Bradwell, Founder of the *Chicago Legal News*."

<<http://womeninbusiness.about.com/od/famouswomenentrepreneurs/p/myrabradwell.htm>

> (Sept. 20, 2008); and Oxford University, "Bradwell, Myra Colby,"

<<http://anb.org/articles/11/11-00095.html>> (Sep. 18, 2008).]